

Third letter from Arthur to Mary Prior, 29 April, 1945¹

Letter 133²

Sun 29/4/45
NZ 421486
ACI Prior (N.V)
No. 5 Squadron
NZAPO 361.

Darling da,

My last two letters are mostly taken up with a history of Necessitarianism, arising out of the first instalment of your new draft of "The Apocalypse of Ishmael". I'm not done with the subject yet – there are one or two other points of relevance both to Melville & to Dostoievsky.

I want to go a little further into the earlier Jesuit version of Edward's doctrine of the will – Molinism - & into the question of what's wrong with it. It's not just that it posits free agents outside of God – I think the idea of creation involves that anyway.*³ But it depicts God as calculating how to get results in a world where the basic conditions of working are not imposed by Himself. I think that is as good a summing up as can be given of Molinism, at least as seen by its opponents. And if God doesn't impose these conditions upon either Himself or us, the question obviously arises, Who does impose them? Molinism neither asks that question nor answers it; & the blank that remains in one's mind has [2] something sinister about it. Is there another God somewhere, one whom we haven't heard about & of whom it is advisable not to speak? Maybe this other God is not a person – maybe what our God has to contend with is just "the void"; but there's something sinister even about that. Particularly when it leads the Jesuits to describe God as being forced by this unnamed power to resort to "scheming." It means this: God does not trust His creatures; because they are not His creatures only, but have been given form partly by the unnamed Unknown. So instead of trusting us, He juggles with us, & turns us into weapons with which He keeps the Unknown at bay.

Nor, of course, can we trust Him, since that is how He uses us. There is a very profound pessimism at the bottom of this Jesuit conception. It's not just that the universe is at bottom bad; in a sense that's Christian orthodoxy; but "the universe" is conceived very largely, & the "bottom" of it is very deep; it is a "bottom" which is beyond God's control. God can't help the universe being bad; He cannot transform it into anything different; & so He takes it for what it [3] is, & takes its "necessities" as absolute; & then does what He can with it, cleverly, masterfully, Jesuitically, like Ivan Karamazon's Grand Inquisitor (who has a similar pessimism). God stands before "Necessity" as Ahab before the White Whale, & behaves like Ahab too. That is the "secret" which Ivan Karamazov sees in Jesuitry, & Melville in the Jesuitical Calvinism of New England. And like Ivan, Melville fears that its presupposition is true.*⁴

¹ Editors' note: This letter has been edited by David Jakobsen. It is part of the Ann Prior Collection, kept at The Bodleian Library in Oxford, box 12.558-4, folder 3, April, item 130. The letter is written on standard writing paper from 'National Patriotic Fund Board for New Zealand'.

² Editor's note: Arthur Prior has numbered the letters sent to Mary and, as he does later in this letter, uses these for references.

³ Written in the margin: "I mean, if God hasn't created free agents outside Himself, then He has hardly created anything."

⁴ Written in the margin: " See "Moby Dick", Ch. 118, "The Candles" – "There is some unsuffusing thing beyond thee, thou clear spirit, to whom all thy eternity is but time, all thy creativeness mechanical." This echoes the Parsee doctrine that there is a being more primeval than Osmugd & Absiman.(unclear)."

Barth handles this whole subject in his Dogmatic II/1, under the head of God's "Constancy & Omnipotence." He holds that, like all God's attributes, His "constancy" has a caricature, which is often attributed to Him instead of the real thing; & this caricature of God's constancy is what old divines used to call His "immutability." There is a changelessness which is incompatible with His being the living Lord. This point is made by John Dickie also, in the first part of his "Organism" & the section which deals with God's "Attributes of Absolute Personality." It's just a brief paragraph about His un-changeableness, but is very good. But Barth, of course, is more thorough. There's one passage I [4] remember which Canetti⁵ freely translated for me as he read it, where Barth says that if God is not "living", then He is dead, & if God is dead, then Death is God (that is the name of the "other God" whom the Molinists leave unidentified*). Canetti was particularly fascinated by this passage, because, like Ivan & Melville, he believes that it's true that "Death is God", & for that reason he hates God. This "caricature" of God's constancy is frankly pointed out by Barth in the classical Calvinist divines (including Polanus, the one he seems to like best, who preceded him three or four centuries ago at Basle); though of course they didn't start it – I suppose it started when the Hebrew of Christianity was translated into Greek; but it has to be attacked in the Bible too. But you'll find a good example of the "caricature" in that old "Theological Dictionary" I bought once, under the head of "Immutability". There is a quotation there from the 18th century Scottish divine Blair, where God's "immutability" is so interpreted that the idea of His answering prayer is quite emasculated (of course under the pretext of "explaining" & "defending" it).

I begin to see Canetti's system [5] now a lot better than I could when I knew him. It is very probable that he had read "Moby Dick"; Frang[?] Steiner had; & Canetti was a novelist himself, & had a vast library; even the fragment of it that he managed to save from the Nazis was impressive; I first read Pascal's "Essai sur la Grace" at his place. He liked, though he did not believe in, religions which hold to immortality but rejected a Supreme Being – like the ancient priestly Egyptian religion – better than ones which denied immortality but accepted a Supreme Being – like Akhnaton's⁶ reformed Egyptian religion (which by the way, was a form of Sun-worship). Canetti hated Akhnaton, & all monotheists, because he believed that the "One God" of all of them is really Death, & he conceived it as his mission to "fight Death". Though at the same time I think he held that monotheism, considered as the affirmation of the supremacy of Death, was objectively true. Either for this reason or for some other he never set a very high value upon objective truth, & considered it an unimaginative eccentricity of Englishmen to do so. Truth was in the pay of the enemy, so to speak – on Death's side in his personal combat. That's what Melville always suspect but [6] can never quite bring himself to admit.

I think that's about the lot on that; & I fancy that in these three letters (131,132,133) plus the bit on the last two pages of the one before (130) about Fatalism and Defiance, I've worked out the convolutions of Necessitarianism more thoroughly than I've ever done it before. I was doubtful when I began it of the value of the history, but when my notes on my Scots book of which your draft instalment reminded me, in turn reminded me that Edwards echoed the Jesuits, a whole lot of things began to click in my mind, & they've been doing it ever since. But they've stopped now – or almost; it has just occurred to me as worth jotting down that for Melville the "secret" of all "Gnosticisms" is that "Death is God"; which may help to answer your query about Gnosticism - & now I've been reminded of yet another thing. You mention, in connection with that query, Melville's references to Pythagoras. Pythagoras taught that we all have one life after another, over & over again; but a man with Melville's kind of twist could see that same idea in [7] another way – it also means that we have one death after another, over & over again, & so is another expression of the "supremacy of Death" (& in Buddhism, of course, Death is what it's moving towards – the end of the

⁵ Editor's note: Perhaps this is Elias Canetti (1905-1994) whom Prior could have met while travelling in Europe as a religious journalist from 1937-1938. Canetti was a Bulgarian born, German novelist who moved to Manchester in 1938 after the Anschluss to escape persecution in Germany.

⁶ Editor's note: The word is unclear.

process is not a life “for good”, but death for good at least). And that quotation you give in your draft about Melville’s sense of carrying all tradition in himself, & how it’s a burden to him instead of a help – isn’t that because of his consciousness that it’s all dead? – it doesn’t live in his life, but he dies in its death.

Well this train of thought is petering off now; probably has petered off; & I’m going to make my bed – to sleep in, not for inspection purposes. Folding the blankets in the morning we call “making our bed up”; arranging them for sleep we call “making our bed down.” – And now that my bed is duly “made down”, I can spend what remains of the evening writing to you without interruption, until very near lights-out, when I’ll have to pull down my mosquito-net & tuck it in & get undressed & powder myself & above all have my last-thing-at-night visit to the lavatory & washing-top. It’s just [8] exactly 9:30 p.m., so I guess there’s plenty of time to write this page – certainly at the rate I’ve been going! I missed Church this morning, being on duty. I have last night’s five letters from you by me still. Some of them are such lovely long ones too; for all your late nights; especially one written last Saturday night & Sunday morning, beginning with Keith & Beryl’s visit, & going on to some corking descriptions of Martin standing up in his cot, a bit about money from the Airforce, chunks about Melville, & other oddments about Ruth Mc Junes & the like. By the way, I take it you know that when Starbuck calls Moby Dick the Demogorgon of the sailors, the being he’s referring to (Demogorgon) is the evil Creator of the world in the Gnostic systems; though in Shelley’s “Prometheus Unbound”, Demogorgon is a good being. But enough of these cosmic goodies & baddies! I’ve just room now to tell you I love you & love you & love you; & I really do, darling darling

- Arthur

Kisses to Martin.⁷

⁷ Written in the bottom right corner is: A.N.P.